

## **Ten Lessons the Arts Teach**

by Elliot Eisner



### **The arts teach children to make good judgments about qualitative relationships.**

Unlike much of the curriculum in which correct answers and rules prevail, in the arts, it is judgment rather than rules that prevail. How qualities interact, whether in sight or sound, whether through prose or poetry, whether in the choreographed movement we call dance or in an actor's lines and gestures—these relationships matter. They cannot be neglected; they are the means through which the work becomes expressive.

School curriculum, however, is heavily weighted towards subject matter that gives students the illusion that rightness depends upon following rules. Spelling, arithmetic and writing as they are usually taught are largely rule abiding subjects. This is not so in the arts. The arts insist that understanding relationships is vital and that valuable relationships are achieved when the mind works together with the child's feelings. It is when emotions connect with thinking that lessons more fully impact the learner.

### **The arts teach children that problems can have more than one solution and that questions can have more than one answer.**

If they do anything, the arts embrace diversity of outcome. Standardization of solution and uniformity of response is no virtue in the arts. While the teacher of spelling is not particularly interested in promoting the student's ingenuity, the arts teacher seeks it.



### **The arts celebrate multiple perspectives.**

One important lesson is that there are many ways to see and interpret the world. This too is a lesson that is seldom taught in our schools. For example, the multiple-choice objective test celebrates the single correct answer. That's what makes the test "objective." It is not objective because of the way the test items were selected; it is objective because of the way they are scored. It makes no allowance in scoring for the scorer to exercise judgment, which is why machines can do it.

**The arts teach children that in complex forms of problem solving, purposes are seldom fixed,** but change with circumstances and opportunity. Learning in the arts requires the ability and a willingness to surrender to the unanticipated possibilities of the work as it unfolds.

At its best, work in the arts is not a monologue delivered by the artist to the work, but rather, a dialogue of sorts. It is a conversation with materials, a conversation punctuated with all of the surprises and uncertainty that a stimulating conversation can make possible. In the arts, one hopes for surprise, surprise that redefines goals; and purposes are held with flexibility. The aim is more than impressing into a material what you already know, but actually discovering what you don't.

### **The arts make vivid the fact that neither words in their literal form nor numbers exhaust what we can know.**

Put simply, the limits of our language do not define the limits of our cognition. The reduction of "knowing" to the quantifiable and the literal is too high a price to pay in defining the conditions of knowledge. What we come to know through literature, poetry and the arts is not reducible to the literal and neither is the world in which we live.

### **The arts teach students that small differences can have large effects.**

The arts abound in subtleties. Paying attention to subtleties is not typically a dominant mode of perception in the ordinary course of our lives. We typically see things in order to recognize them rather than to explore the nuances of our visual field. For example, how many of us here have really seen the façade of our own house? I suspect few. One test is to try to draw it. We tend to look *at* our house or *for* our house in order to know if we have arrived home, or to decide if it needs to be painted, or to determine if anyone's there. Seeing its visual qualities and their relationships is much less common.



## **The arts teach students to think through and within a material.**

All art forms employ some means through which ideas become real. In music it is patterned sound; in dance it is the movement of a dancer; in the visual arts it is visual form, perhaps on a canvas, a block of granite, a sheet of steel or aluminum; in theater it's a combination of speech, movement and sometimes song. Each of these art forms uses materials that impose certain demands on those who use them.

They also provide an array of distinctive opportunities. To realize such opportunities, the child must be able to convert a material into a medium. For this to occur, the child must learn to think within both the possibilities and the constraints of a material and then use techniques that make the conversion of a material into a medium possible. A material is not the same as a medium and vice versa. Material is the stuff you work with and a medium is the form through which ideas are communicated using whatever materials have been chosen. A medium conveys choices, decisions, ideas and images that the individual wants to express. The challenge for the child then is to take a material—be it color, sound, texture or movement—to think within the limitations and possibilities of the given material and then to use the material(s) to shape their idea.



## **The arts help children learn to say what sometimes cannot be said.**

When children are invited to describe what a work of art makes them feel, they must reach into their poetic capacities to find the words that will convey their message accurately.

Talking about art makes some special demands on those discussing it. Think, for a moment, about what is required to describe the qualities of a jazz trumpet solo by Louis Armstrong, the surface of a painting by Vincent Van Gogh, the seemingly effortless movements of Mikhail Baryshnikov or the poetic theatrical language of William Shakespeare. The task is to express through language the qualities that are oftentimes beyond words, hence the challenge is to say what cannot be said. It is here that suggestion and association are among our strongest allies. It is here that metaphor, the most powerful of language capacities, comes to the rescue.

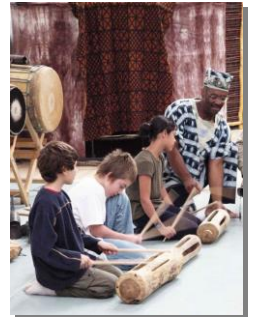
## **The arts enable us to experience the world in ways we cannot through any other source.**

The arts communicate meaning and it is through artistic experiences that we discover the expanse of what we are capable of both perceiving and feeling. Some works of art have the capacity to put us into another world because the experience is so powerful. The wish then in teaching *literacy* is not simply to help children learn how to read a book but to help them use their reading skills to then imagine images while they read. In addition, literacy includes the ability to perceive our world through many different senses: visual, tactile, kinesthetic and auditory. It is because of more diverse literacy that children are able to understand the world's artwork and subsequently, to access the joy, delight and insight those works of art make possible. Ultimately, when a child can perceive and understand a work of art—be it a symphony, a play, a dance or a painting—they gain the skills to then perceive and understand the world in which they live.

## **The arts' position in the school curriculum symbolizes to the young what adults believe is important.**

Without question, the curriculum of the school shapes children's thinking. It symbolizes what adults believe is important in order for the young to be competent in the world and tells children which human aptitudes are valuable to possess.

The value of a subject of study determines both its presence in the curriculum as well as the amount of time the school devotes to it. Indeed, the most telling indicator of the importance of a field of study is not found in school district testimonies, but in the amount of time it receives and when it is taught during both the school day and school week. Add to these considerations the relationship between what is tested and what those test scores mean to the overall evaluation of the student and you have a recipe for defining what counts in schools.



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